DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 463 884 PS 030 303

AUTHOR Farkas, Steve; Johnson, Jean
TITLE Aggravating Circumstances: A Status Report on Rudeness in America.
INSTITUTION Public Agenda Foundation, New York, NY.
SPONS AGENCY Pew Charitable Trusts, Philadelphia, PA.
ISBN ISBN-1-889483-75-3
PUB DATE 2002-00-00
NOTE 59p.; Produced with Ann Duffett and Kathleen Collins.
AVAILABLE FROM Public Agenda, 6 East 39th Street, New York, NY 10016 ($10). Tel: 212-686-6610; Fax: 212-889-3461; e-mail: info@publicagenda.org; Web site: http://www.publicagenda.org.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE Document Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Child Relationship; Adults; Behavior Problems; Children; Focus Groups; Interpersonal Communication; Interpersonal Relationship; National Surveys; *Public Opinion; *Social Behavior; Telephone Surveys
IDENTIFIERS Courtesy; Manners; Respect; *Rudeness

ABSTRACT

How people treat each other in their daily interactions seems to be profoundly important and even central to the definition of a "civilized" society. This nationwide survey examined what Americans are thinking about courtesy, manners, rudeness, and respect. Data were gathered through a random sample telephone survey of 2,013 adults conducted in January 2002; individual interviews with leaders in academic, media, public interest groups, and customer relations organizations; and seven focus groups. Six major findings emerged from the study: (1) Americans say that while disrespect, lack of consideration, and rudeness are serious, pervasive problems that affect them on a personal level, they acknowledge that the treatment of racial and ethnic minorities and the disabled has improved; (2) respondents believe that too many business and customer service employees are careless, apathetic, and unhelpful, with almost half of those surveyed indicating that they had walked out of a business because of bad service; (3) the majority of respondents complained about inconsiderate, even dangerous drivers, rude cell phone users, and an almost ubiquitous onslaught of profanity and coarse language; (4) Americans are particularly concerned about the discourteous and disrespectful conduct of children, and they hold parents responsible for this phenomenon; (5) respondents point to a variety of factors to explain the deterioration of courtesy and respectfulness, including too much crowding and a declining sense of community; and (6) most people believe that the shock and loss of September 11th changed the behavior of Americans for the better, but they suspect that the change will be short-lived. (Supportive data tables, endnotes, and a description of the methodology conclude this report.) (KB)

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